# 'Building a humane society'

## *An intellectual sketch of H. Odera Oruka* [1]

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## Abstract

This paper discusses Odera Oruka's philosophical work from the perspective of its emphasis on the 'practical' impetus that Oruka himself underlined. In different ways, his various projects - his sage philosophy, his philosophy of liberty, his environmental philosophy and, perhaps most importantly, his critiques of African (and implicitly Kenyan) social and political realities - can be seen as manifestations of his commitment to the practical relevance and social significance of knowledge, and his conviction about the potentially liberating force of philosophical critique. Here, I try to provide an overall sketch of this agenda, seeking to initiate more thorough and detailed discussion for the future. As a main reference point for discussion, I look at how the term 'humanism' has been used (and can be used) to describe Oruka's work, in contrast to the invocation of this term by some nationalist political ideologies, in particular Moi's so-called '*nyayo* philosophy'. Oruka's work could be more explicitly appreciated and explored, I argue, for the ways in which he observed and actively criticized instances of inhumanity and 'false humanism' in post-colonial Africa.

## Key Words

Odera Oruka, humanism, liberty, freedom, ideology

*We are in the season of light but we are in the epoch of darkness. There is a glimmer that democracy is coming and coming to stay. But democracy or no democracy, we are still in great darkness about much that we need to know. (Oruka 1992, 30)*

## Introduction

There can be little doubt that H. Odera Oruka's philosophy was one of practical engagement. By questioning common assumptions, clarifying concepts, and using theoretical reflection to reconsider human fundamentals as well as concrete social and political issues in Africa, he pursued a practical goal to improve society. In particular, in his own society in Kenya – where he was based, as one of a few internationally cited African intellectuals who stayed on the

continent, he faced the hardships of everyday life on different fronts. Yet he was astonishingly productive in terms of published intellectual output. In addition to his prolific systematic philosophical works, he regularly wrote newspaper articles, thereby extending the philosophical questioning process to a wide readership of fellow citizens whom academic philosophers could rarely address. Indeed, his practical engagement and commitment through the way he perceived, learned and employed philosophy, has been worked out and highlighted by several scholars, most recently in extended studies by Anke Graness (2011) and Oruka's student Oriare Nyarwath (2009). Yet these studies should be seen rather as eye-openers and stepping-stones towards further exploration of Oruka's wide-ranging thought than as definite or final assessments.

Over the years, Oruka's work has been discussed most thoroughly and consistently by Gail Presbey (e.g. 2000; 2002a; 2002b; 2007), who is a leading authority on Oruka's sage philosophy project and one of the few continuing to practice this important approach as a research method. Many others have, in the meantime, commented upon or used Oruka's work, more than can be named and cited here (e.g. Masolo 1994; 1997a; 1997b; 2006; Ochieng'-Odhiambo 1997; 2010; Janz 1998; 2009; Wiredu 1997). Despite the diverse opinions we may encounter in the interpretation and assessment of his sage philosophy project (Oruka 1991) or his 'four trends' perspective on the field of African philosophy (Oruka 1990), his paramount commitment to practical and practically relevant matters will not be questioned by anyone. As a philosopher, he employed skills of critical reflection and basic questioning to provide guidelines for better orientation of intellectual debates among members of the academic community as well as social debates within the wider public.

Indeed, Oruka himself took great care to spell out and emphasize the basic practical orientation of his work. To remind us briefly, the title of his posthumously published collection of essays, selected by him, is *Practical philosophy: in search of an ethical minimum* (Oruka 1997). Picking up on this title and the program it represents, Anke Graness (2011) has recently provided an engaging book-length discussion of social justice from what we may call an Orukan perspective, contextualizing his arguments within the contemporary global debate on social justice. Oruka can be understood as having advocated that philosophy itself, within and beyond academia, "has to be made *sagacious*" (Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 251-260, esp. 253-4). The adjective *sagacious* can perhaps best be understood to mean driven by the impetus of an insight perceived as 'wise', with a view to the practical

benefit within a social context (see Kresse 2009; for an extended contextual study, see Kresse 2007). This expression pushes for the practical commitment and social relevance of philosophy, contrasting, along these lines, 'the mere philosopher' (lacking this attitude) from the 'sage proper'. In contrast to the former who, in Oruka's words, merely "looks for pure knowledge and tries to express knowledge", the latter (whether or not he or she is an academic) actually "*cares about* knowledge" and thus adds a "moral spirit" to knowledge (Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 254; my emphasis). So, the sage proper is defined by this moral dimension as one who seeks to put knowledge and wisdom to good use for the benefit of society.

We can see the commitment to the promotion of human welfare illustrated in Oruka's own work, in the leading idea of a sagacious commitment of philosophy that holds together the multiple aspects of his engagement. His concise but suggestive philosophical treatise, *The Philosophy of Liberty* (1991; 2nd ed. 1996), develops a conception of freedom that addresses basic material contexts and bodily needs of human beings, and views economic and political self-determination as interlinked aspects of major practical concern. In the second edition of this book, Oruka added an outspoken, illustrative and critical discussion of the disappointing state of affairs in Africa (1996, esp. 87-110), and of the enduring (and seemingly paradoxical) state of 'unfreedom' in 'post-independence' times (cf. Oginga 1968), in economic, political and ideological respects. As he saw it, this was based on the continuing international dependencies that global strategies of 'under-development' have kept in place. In the first edition, Oruka had only hinted at the need for these concrete issues of African contemporary postcolonial realities to be addressed in an inclusive and comprehensive discussion of 'liberty' with special reference to Africa, a direction of critique he intended to pursue (Oruka 1991, 86-87). There, he had left it at rather vague and general implicit comments pointing at African experiences when discussing 'Marxist-existentialist' positions on liberty, and their sub-differentiations between 'ruling' and 'dominant' classes, the former referring to national political elites and the latter to international politico-economic (usually capitalist) power centres responsible for ongoing structural dependencies. For cases that commonly apply to contemporary Africa, he saw the locally based ruling class *de facto* acting as a kind of 'filter', mediating and translating pressures and directives from the externally situated dominant class (Oruka 1991, 40-44). In the second edition, he went much further and provided examples from various African countries and their postcolonial experiences, illustrating his discussion of 'the paradox of Independence as still unfreedom' (Oruka 1996, 99ff). As a bottom-line, in

order to provide a future perspective for true liberty in African societies, "new ideas" (Oruka 1996, 110) and normative commitments would have to replace the old ideologies of dependency that had continued (yet somewhat become transformed) from colonial to postcolonial times.

Oruka's most well-known and widely discussed sage philosophy project, in which he documented the thoughts of non-academic yet socially recognised thinkers, can be seen to address some practical concerns as well - not least the stubborn historical (and racially underpinned) Eurocentric prejudice against Africans' ability to think critically or philosophically. This has been richly discussed, compared, commented upon and applied in philosophical research, making a strong contribution to research on philosophical traditions in Africa and beyond. Finally, a string of politically concerned articles and essays underline what we might call a primary concern with the practical in Oruka's work; this includes critical reflections on global and regional power structures; on foreign aid and development practices; on autocratic political leadership; on the negligence of ecology in ethics (especially Oruka 1994), and other topics (for the broadest coverage of the spectrum of his intellectual activities, see Oruka 1997; Graness and Kresse eds 1997).

## Humanism: The True and the False

As a useful conceptual label, we may think of Oruka's philosophical project as advocating the idea of a 'true humanism', while engaging in unveiling and fighting forms of 'false humanism' that he saw at work in political and academic contexts that he was concerned with. When starting to prepare for this paper, I went over my own brief introduction to the volume *Sagacious reasoning* (Kresse In Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 11-18). Back then, I was reminded, I had already flagged up the issue of practical relevance in Oruka's philosophical work overall, and presented his corpus on sage philosophy as an important aspect of his overall drive to critical questioning, reconsideration, and social change. Re-reading my text, it struck me that the term 'humanism' came up more often than I had expected. Pondering this with hindsight, it seems to me that this term might indeed have something more to offer: as an overarching conceptual principle it summarizes and qualifies Oruka's work, while it can also be used to discuss it critically and productively. When I stated back then that "the evolvement of a specific understanding of 'humanism' was one of Oruka's major concerns from the beginning to the end of his work" (Kresse 1997, 14), it seems my thoughts were already going

in this direction. This position is also supported by Oriare Nyarwath's recent Ph.D. thesis which discusses Oruka's complete philosophical work in overview (Nyarwath 2009). In his concluding summary, Nyarwath re-emphasises the prevailing normative role of philosophy for Oruka, employing the term 'humanism', as he said Oruka would do, to refer to "the promotion of human dignity and the equality of human life" (Nyarwath 2009, 249).

For the purposes of this paper, I will try to use 'humanism' as a starting point and a kind of ordering principle for my reflections and the attempt to provide a rough sketch of a broad intellectual portrait of Odera Oruka, drawing from selected textual samples (and a related recent paper, Kresse 2012). In doing so, I will contrast conceptions of 'true' and 'false' humanism as they have been employed in the context of African political discourse and its presentation and theorization by African statesmen, political ideologies and commentaries.

Hereby, I am borrowing from Paulin Hountondji's distinction between true and false pluralism in the final chapter of his classic *African philosophy: myth and reality* (1983, 2nd ed. 1996; first published in French in 1976). Hountondji was criticising the theoretically reductive and practically suppressive positions employed by African political rulers and governments in the early postcolonial period which were drawing from a relativist conception of 'cultural pluralism' based on the anthropological discourse of the time. In that context, African cultures were presented as units that were different and distinct from others (e.g. European or Asian ones), and on a political level their demand to equal recognition and material provisions was pushed. Yet these African cultures, commonly under the reductive singular of 'African traditional culture', were often presented as largely homogenous and static units. For Hountondji, this was clearly a false assumption that belied the historical fact of the existent internal dynamics and contestations within African cultures (and their lively exchange with others). Hountondji detected a political motif in this kind of presentation, which the new postcolonial rulers pushed in order to sanction and enhance their control over a political agenda of nationalisation and unification policies. Under these circumstances, dissenting voices were suppressed in the name of a static image of (supposedly collectively binding but actually prescribed) 'African traditional values' – which can be linked to the mistaken idea of a clearly delineated and overarching system of 'African traditional religion' (still popularly referred to as 'ATR' in some academic circles). In contrast, Hountondji was advocating the need to observe and discuss (with a view to Africa's past) the existence of many instances and dynamic traditions of 'internal pluralism' in African cultures and societies, with open political

contestations, debates and exchanges of arguments. In turn, and with a view to the present, Hountondji found it necessary and fruitful to pick up and engage with them on various levels. (This is a parallel I found inspiring, but we may or may not want to consider more, in comparison, in the ensuing discussion.)

Drawing from Hountondji, I here regard as 'false humanism' the ideological invocation of a humanist perspective within actual processes of suppressing political opponents or dissenting voices. By 'true humanism', in contrast, I refer to the dedicated commitment, manifested in someone's actions, to the improvement of the overall circumstances of living of people, in the name of the global community of human beings. It will not be surprising that I take Oruka's work to represent a position of 'true humanism'; this position should be concretized and elaborated upon more than I can do in this brief contribution, and it should also be thoroughly questioned. I will illustrate my sketch of it below, after dealing with some paradigmatic positions of 'false humanism'. However, it is important to note that a clear-cut distinction between 'true' and 'false' might in reality not always be applicable or tenable. Not only does this differentiation imply assumptions about the motivations of a social actor concerned (information that we do not always have), but also the empirical field of the dynamic (and partly dialectical) oppositions and political contestations might often be too complex or blurred for us to clearly identify positions in this binary manner.

Of course, the term 'humanism' itself has been subject to a range of critical interrogations and discussions in the humanities, particularly from post-structuralist positions advocating the need to apply a hermeneutics of suspicion. I may not fundamentally disagree with this (though I am not completely sure), but for the purposes of this paper I am limiting myself to the explicit usages of the term within African political discussions relevant here.

## 'False Humanism' in African Political Discourse: Dressing up Autocracy

Over the postcolonial decades in Africa, a range of governments and individual political rulers have employed much rhetorical power and persuasion to dress up the increasingly autocratic nature of the political realities in their countries. This is well documented, and as an ideological sibling to 'African socialism' (in different forms and interpretations) and 'African nationalism' (likewise), the label of 'African humanism' got to play a prominent role in this as well (cf. Kresse 2012). In stating this, I do not want to be misunderstood to be simply

dismissing these terms or the ideologies they stand for. Indeed, they are rooted in important historical developments and political debates in response to dismissive and demeaning attitudes and a grand narrative that was first employed by the European colonial powers. I think these ideological positions initially had a fruitful impact on politics and political discourse in Africa, but they became more ambivalent and questionable with time, the more decisively a pre-defined and exclusive meaning of them was employed by rulers and governments whose political dominance became more and more dogmatic.

'African humanism' was most explicitly used as a programmatic term for a national ideology in Zambia, where President Kenneth Kaunda coined a doctrine with this name. He appraised the sensible and collective nature of certain 'traditional' African cultural values, and implored the citizens to adhere to an implicit normative consensus to which they seemed bound by cultural, regional and national affinity. Thus 'humanism' was employed as a strong rhetorical means and conceived as a basis and underpinning of political unity in the existent one-party state (which itself was taken to be a representation of social consensus). In their nationalist ideologies, Kaunda and other African leaders operating along the same kind of rhetorical line - such as Nkrumah, Nyerere, Senghor, and others - invoked the idea of a common basic humanism underlying their respective visions and versions of 'Africanity' or 'African personality'. In parallel, the image of an overarching traditional African society (across nations) that was particularly humane, 'man-centred' and oriented toward solidarity and 'mutual aid' was pushed (Kaunda 1968, 4-5).

As such, African society was taken to be characterised by a humane orientation, governed by principles of 'familyhood' (in Kiswahili: *ujamaa*) that were to be used and recreated by nation-building policies as in Nyerere's Tanzania, for instance, for the benefit of the development of a supposedly modern African state and citizenry (see Nyerere 1973). These ideas were coined initially as part of liberating ideologies of anti-colonial independence movements, but they turned dogmatic after these movements had taken over political power. Among the first generation of political rulers of newly independent African countries, there were quite a few 'philosopher kings', as Wiredu called them alluding to Plato (Wiredu 1996, 146), who were the intellectual architects of the political space within which they later also ruled. If this was done in the name of African humanism, 'humanism' was surely invoked under false pretence, when, in the name of social solidarity, familyhood, and 'traditional

African values', political rivals were oppressed or even outlawed, and all significant decisions made from top to bottom without any relevant democratic consultation or election processes.

In the case of Kenya, where Odera Oruka lived and worked most of his life (apart from the years of university studies in the USA and Sweden), this can be illustrated when looking at the decades after Independence, under the presidential regimes of both Jomo Kenyatta (1963-1978) and Daniel arap Moi (1978-2002). Kenyatta started turning Kenya into a *de facto* one-party state from 1968 on, when he and his governing KANU party made political work for opposition parties practically impossible and suppressed all possibilities for the public voicing of discontent. An example of this is the banning of Kenya's only remaining opposition party, the Kenyan People's Union (KPU) which had been newly founded in 1966 by disappointed members of Kenyatta's KANU government who had become frustrated with the government's lack of touch with ordinary citizens. The KPU was silenced and its members and supporters threatened with force or actually put in detention. This happened to the leader of KPU and former KANU founding member and Vice-President, Oginga Odinga (1911-1994).

In addition, the youth were not spared - for instance, the then 22-year old Abdilatif Abdalla in Mombasa, who later became a famous Swahili poet through the publication of *Sauti ya Dhiki* (1973), a collection of his poems written in detention. Abdalla had been writing and distributing anonymous pamphlets critical of Kenyatta's KANU government, even comparing its 'dictatorial' features with that of the recently overcome British colonialists and the ongoing white apartheid regime in South Africa (Abdalla 1968; unpublished). Abdalla was sentenced to three years in solitary confinement for treason, purportedly in the interest of national unity and national security during the volatile period of 'Africanisation' policies in Kenya, when Kenyatta and KANU tightened their exclusive grip on power. In public speeches at the time, Kenyatta likened the opposition KPU-supporters to treacherous 'snakes' who can and indeed should be crushed (Kenyatta 1968, 343-344). In contrast, he introduced the quasi-biographical volume of his collected speeches with an endorsement of humane *ujamaa* politics in which the conception of familyhood, he said, should be extended further to include the whole of humanity (Kenyatta 1968, p.xi).

Later on, under Moi's presidency (1978-2002), we similarly witnessed a glaring gap between Moi's public and seemingly humanist ideology centred around the terms 'peace, love and unity', and his authoritarian demand to subordination and blind, unthinking following to himself as the undisputable supreme ruler. In a public speech in the early 1980s, he demanded of the Kenyan people "to sing like parrots - to sing whatever song I sing, just like I did when Kenyatta was still ruling" (quoted in Ngugi 1986, 62). This was Moi's admonition to Kenyans to adhere to the '*nyayo* principle' which he coined to characterize his leadership, which itself gained authority only through its relational reference to Kenyatta before him: *nyayo* means 'footsteps' in Kiswahili, and the implication here is that the president's footsteps - the directives and directions of previous and current presidents - have to be followed whatever the case (Moi 1986). A national ideology under the authoritarian demand (and title) of *nyayo* on the one hand, and the creation of an image of social harmony by invoking *peace, love and unity* on the other, put a lot of pressure on people disaffected with the government, and on potential dissidents. Indeed, who would want to be publicly seen to stand against peace, love, or unity, or to be identified as a threat to them? The humanist appearance of *nyayo* ideology, through the positive conceptual connotations that it invokes on the surface, is unveiled as deceiving, once the strict *nyayo* order, to step in line and follow on blindly, has properly made itself understood.

The above are instances and manifestations of false humanism as they occurred in Kenya, where Oruka witnessed them, fought against them, and in response developed features of what we may call a 'true' or genuine philosophical humanism. Let us first look at his own descriptions and critical assessments of the situation in Kenya and Africa on the whole. One dark and (almost) desperate yet clear-cutting version of them he provided in 1978, in an article on "Philosophy and humanism in Africa". For the purposes of his discussion, he notably used the fictive yet representative country of 'ARID', short for what he calls the African Republic of Inhumanity and Death, as an "example of the degree to which inhumanity has replaced humanism" in Africa (Oruka 1997, 138). Here is a chilling quote from this article, characterizing the state of affairs in ARID as a representative postcolonial state in Africa which has completely lost the sociable and humane features previously flagged up by the 'philosopher kings' (as seen above). In this scenario, political structures, an infrastructure of power, and an arbitrary will deciding upon life and death, all revolve around the figure of a ruthless absolute ruler:

> The authority is omnipresent. The police force and the state security militia form the very severe and persuasive hand of the political authority; they arrest, torture, detain and kill with impunity and indiscriminately, except for the unmistakable members and associates of the regime, who must not be touched except by the order and green light from the supreme political person. Members of the regime who fall out with him or whom he deems not strong in their loyalty he orders to be wiped out with the utmost speed (Oruka 1997, 142).

When I asked Oruka , in an interview in 1995, about his sketch above of the political postcolonial scenario in Africa that he depicted in the late 1970s, he replied upon reflection that his writings had sadly been confirmed by the political realities, and (in the cases of Liberia, Rwanda and Somalia) even 'over confirmed' (Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 259). Under such conditions, as Oruka put it back then, "humanity has sunk" (Oruka 1997, 143), but not the yearning within the population for a more humane world – and according to Oruka, it is one of philosophy's first and most basic tasks to work towards the establishment or restoration of humane conditions of living. This is work for practical 'humanism' in the sense of, as he puts it, a basic "quality and security of human life" (Oruka 1997, 138). For Oruka, philosophy, not least in its broad conception as 'free thinking' (Oruka 1997, 145), is and should be inextricably linked to a vision of humanism, and to the conceptual and practical ways of realising such a vision. The case made here, in this one brief article, might in parallel also apply to Oruka's overall output of philosophical works (though of course this cannot really be worked out here). One way, and perhaps the most important way for philosophy of making itself relevant, is by insisting on the practical use and liberating potential of its intellectual force - this is another way of saying, perhaps, that philosophy has to become (or should indeed stay) sagacious; that is, to be employed to good use, for the benefit of one's social peers.

Oruka pursued the agenda of using philosophy for the benefit of mankind from early on, and revised and expanded his own work accordingly, documenting and clarifying his thought process. This can, for instance, be seen in the chapters he added to the second edition of *Punishment and terrorism in Africa* (1985; first 1976): following critical remarks by readers and reviewers, he added two chapters discussing contemporary practical dimensions of the death penalty and 'legal terrorism' in Africa, a term he introduces "as a fitting expression describing what generally goes on in the treatment of both offenders and many innocent citizens in much of modern Africa" (Oruka 1985, 103). What Oruka means, and further on illustrates and discusses by involving examples, is the misuse of the judiciary and legal

frameworks by morally corrupt governments and rulers. Oruka's following statement on 'legal terrorism', taking a bold stand and giving an unmistakenly clear critical message to those in power - written and published in Kenya during the period in which Moi had just confirmed and invigorated one-party rule under his leadership (in 1982) - is, by any standards, a remarkable testimony to outspoken political critique of oppressive governments by an African intellectual based in Africa:

> It is that law is essentially an instrument used by the state (i.e. the group in political power) to give itself the trappings of legitimacy for inhuman conduct such as the mistreatment, torture and murder of people considered politically or socially undesirable. Law becomes identical with the whims of those in political power (Oruka 1985, 106).

Here, we see an engaged philosopher working against all-abounding moral and political deterioration and decay in his country and continent, and, as he put it in the preface to the second edition, towards 'the building of a humane society' in Africa as an ultimate goal (Oruka 1985, p.xiii).

## Conclusion - 'True humanism': Oruka's perspective and reference-points

For a vision of political future, how it could be (or could have been) in terms of productive and serious engagement with the people's wishes and interests in Kenya, Oruka turns to a discussion of one of his political heroes and indeed an iconic alternative leader-figure of the 1980s and 1990s. The Luo politician Jaramogi Oginga Odinga had this appeal not only for many Kenyan Luos, but also for many other disgruntled Kenyans all over the country (as the young Abdilatif Abdalla, mentioned above). Odinga, at the time the highest cultural leading-figure of the Kenyan Luo community (*ker*), was also the former leader of the Kenyan People's Union (KPU), perhaps the only serious opposition party that Kenya had ever experienced, at least before the reinstatement of multi-party politics in 1992 when he again became a focal figure for opposition groups. He had also been a leading figure of the anti-colonial nationalist struggle for independence, one of the founding members of the Kenya African National Union (KANU), Kenya's first Vice-President under Kenyatta, and indeed the one who played a key role when the negotiations for Kenyatta's release from colonial imprisonment in the period leading up to Independence was on the cards.

In 1992, Oruka published a book on Odinga that combined the explicit topical concern with national Kenyan politics with the ideas of his sage philosophy program, under the title *Oginga Odinga: His Philosophy and Beliefs*. This book was to be the first of what was anticipated to

be a series of book-length studies of individual African sages (Oruka in Graness and Kresse eds. 1997, 252). However, due to Oruka's tragic early demise, it turned out to be the only one. In Oruka's summarizing description, Odinga appears as the one remaining representative of a true humanist position in politics in Kenya, a thoughtful, reasonable, and moral decision-maker for the people and the nation, in contrast to Kenyatta or Moi who are cast as self-interested and power-hungry leaders whose regimes stood for moral decay (Oruka1992, 30-31; also 6-7). As Oruka put it, "the *Kenyatta-Moi Republic* had conspicuously declined in moral standing" (Oruka 1992, 31; my emphasis). For a book published in 1992, the year of the first multi-party elections after almost three decades of one-party rule, and during a period of heightened political tension and vulnerability when Moi was still at the height of his power and standing for (re-)election for the first time, this was quite a bold and explicit statement to make - and the same applies to other statements quoted above.

We could play through the same theme in much more depth, and in relation to a number of Oruka's (further) publications, in order to substantiate the argument here much more, on a broader basis and with more focus, about a basic and principled humanist orientation of Oruka's philosophical self-positioning. His position is remarkable not only for his courage or, as Anke Graness has worked out in her recent book (2011), for the timeliness with which it takes up and approaches the discussion of social justice in a global perspective, long before either the topic of social justice or the focus on 'the global' had become fashionable. Oruka was also timely and outspoken in addressing such sensitive matters as 'state terrorism' in Africa (in his early book *Punishment and Terrorism in Africa*, 1976, or such important and trendy ones as an ecological turn in ethics, with a focus on what Oruka calls 'eco-philosophy'. Here, arguing from the background of Western philosophy but also drawing from African intellectual traditions as well as South Asian ones, he develops an innovative argument and original principles for what he called a 'parental earth ethics' (Oruka ed. 1994). This involves the social obligation of all human beings to take care of the global ecological conditions that we hand over to the next generation, while also providing us with a number of guiding principles listed in order of priorities. – In this respect, I found it disappointing to see how Oruka's contribution could be ignored in a recent publication on African conceptual takes on 'environmental ethics' (Ojomo 2010). Finally, his critical reflections on political structures and processes in postcolonial Africa might also have something to offer for current debates on postcoloniality in Africa and beyond.

Perhaps we could say, in sum, for the purposes of this brief and sketchy article (that remains to be elaborated and substantiated further in the future), that the kind of *humanism* that Oruka is arguing and indeed standing for, within the larger scenario of African philosophy or even a global field of philosophical debate, is *at once fundamental*, in terms of addressing the conditions of possibility of social change based on an egalitarian conception of humanity, *and at the same time hands-on*, in terms of being practice-oriented and seeking to deliver when it comes to practical questions of implementing rights and principles that are actually seen to make a difference for both the possibility and realization of social change. As a *practical humanist* and *philosopher of humanism,* building, as he said, a humane society in Africa and beyond was his goal.

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